DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 320 314 EC 231 121

TITLE	Involving Minority and Isolated Parents in the Education of Their Exceptional Students. Parent/Professional Task Force Report.
INSTITUTION	Florida State Dept. of Education, Tallahassee. Bureau of Education for Exceptional Students.
PUB DATE	88
NOTE	34p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Clearinghouse/Information Center, Bureau of Education for Exceptional Students, Division of Public Schools, Florida Department of Education, Knott Building, Tallahassee, FL 32399-0400.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Agency Cooperation; Cultural Differences; Delivery Systems; *Disabilities; Elementary Secondary Education; Ethnic Groups; Low Income Groups; *Minority Groups; Needs Assessment; *Outreach Programs; *Parent Participation; *Parent School Relationship; Rural Education; School Policy
IDENTIFIERS	*Florida

ABSTRACT

Based on the results of a survey of administrators of exceptional student education, a Florida task force examined methods for increasing the involvement of minority parents in the education of their exceptional children and for providing outreach to parents who are isolated. The report centers on parents of exceptional students who are from low socioeconomic levels or differing ethnic groups, or are geographically isolated. The task force identified issues revolving around questions of policy, resources, commitment, and implementation, citing needs for more adequate policy and coordinated services, more adequate funding, more effective use of training materials, greater sensitivity and understanding of culturally diverse families, and greater interagency understanding of existing policies and procedures affecting minority and isolated parent involvement. Recommendations call for development of policies, procedures, and programs focused on overcoming barriers; use of collaborative interagency efforts; identification of multiple funding sources; and provision of comprehensive training for parents and professionals addressing cultural and economic diversity. Specific suggestions for implementation (e.g., use indigenous and experienced parents to help plan and conduct meetings) are provided in a "Strategies and Best Practices" section. Contains about 110 references. (DB)

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PARENT/PROFESSIONAL TASK FORCE REPORT

INVOLVING MINORITY AND ISOLATED PARENTS IN THE EDUCATION OF THEIR EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
DIVISION OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS
BUREAU OF EDUCATION FOR EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS

1988

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PARENT/PROFESSIONAL TASK FORCE REPORT

INVOLVING MINORITY AND ISOLATED PARENTS IN THE EDUCATION OF THEIR EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS

Florida Department of Education
Division of Public Schools
Bureau of Education for Exceptional Students

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PREFACE

As evidence of Florida's continuing commitment to the philosophy that parent involvement in the education of exceptional students is an essential component of effective programs, a Parent/Professional Task Force is appointed annually by the Department of Education to make recommendations to the Bureau of Education for Exceptional Students relating to the development of resources for parent services. Membership on each Task Force is for a one year term to deal efficiently and effectively with a single issue.

Based on the results of a survey of administrators of exceptional student education, the 1987-88 Task Force was charged with developing strategies, resources, and recommendations relevant to the following areas:

- methods for increasing the involvement of minority parents in the education of their exceptional children; and
- means of providing outreach to parents who are isolated.

The 1987-88 Parent/Professional Task Force was composed of over one-third minority members and one-half parents of exceptional students:

Ms. Christy Baker
Florida State University
School of Social Work
Bellamy Building
Tallahassee, Florida 32306

Mrs. Karen Dickerhoof
7007 N.W. 80 Court
Tamarac, Florida 33319

Mrs. Carmen Jimenez
3310 N.W. 27 Avenue
Gainesville, Florida 32605

*Ms. Sandra Crawford Muller
Parent to Parent of Florida
United Cerebral Palsy
621 Kraft Avenue
Panama City, Florida 32401

Mrs. Jackie Sipple
Parent Education Network of Florida, Inc.
2881 Coral Way
Punta Gorda, Florida 33950

Ms. Carnella A. Stewart
FDLRS/Hillsborough Associate Center
Department of Education for Exceptional Students
411 East Henderson Avenue
Tampa, Florida 33602

Mrs. Mary Gail Brooks Williams
201 St. Lucie Lane, #405
Cocoa Beach, Florida 32391

*Task Force Chair

Mrs. Rachel Spanjer
Exceptional Child Education
502 N. Center Street
Perry, Florida 32347

Mrs. Emily Hall
13700 S.W. 62 Street
Apt. 201
Miami, Florida 33181

Dr. Barbara McCray
Palm Beach County Schools
3323 Belvedere Road
West Palm Beach, Florida 33402

Ms. Joanne Scaturro
SEDNET
1940 North Monroe Street, Unit 50
Tallahassee, Florida 32303

Mr. Bill Smallwood
4805 Lenox Avenue
Jacksonville, Florida 32205

Mrs. Kathy Winn
Developmental Services Program
Department of Health & Rehabilitative Services
1317 Winewood Boulevard
Building 5, Room 210
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0700

Mrs. Barbara Wolfson
150 North Halifax Drive
Ormond Beach, Florida 32074

Resource personnel to the Task Force included:

Dr. Diane Talley Davis
South Atlantic Regional
Resource Center
1236 University Drive, North
Plantation, Florida 33322

Dr. Denzil Edge
Parent Education and Resource Center
Department of Special Education
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky 40292

Dr. Bill Wagonseller
Department of Special Education
University of Nevada
Las Vegas, Nevada 89015

This effort was coordinated by the Program Services Section, Bureau of Education for Exceptional Students, Knott Building, Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0400:

Mrs. Judy Felder, Program Specialist, Parent Services
Ms. Laverne Graves, Program Specialist, Personnel Preparation
Mrs. Doris Nabi, Administrator, Program Services Section
Dr. Diane Gillespie, Bureau Chief

Procedures

Convening on three occasions (May 7-8, July 16-17, and September 8-9, 1987) the Task Force developed an outline for the report, conducted research to develop a common base of knowledge from which recommendations could be generated, and developed definitions of key terms. In order to obtain input and review from a cross section of constituency groups, a modified Delphi approach was used in the development of the Task Force report. In addition to the writing and review by Task Force members, each member was asked to identify two additional reviewers to provide feedback on the draft. These reviewers provided ideas for recommendations, strategies, and best practices.

Definitions

Through a process of consensus-building, the Task Force developed the following definitions as a basis for its report:

Parent involvement

> The Task Force adopted the definition of "parent participation" developed for the parent services planning committee report, *Parent Services to Support Florida's Exceptional Students*, Florida Department of Education, 1986. Therefore, for the purpose of this report, "parent involvement" is defined as "a continuum of activities which promote parental [participation] and commitment in the educational process. These activities may range from initial awareness to active participation and commitment resulting in a full parent/professional partnership." (p. 8)

Minority and isolated parents

Kroth & Davis (1986) found that parent leaders and State Education Agency (SEA) personnel estimated that approximately only ten percent (10%) of the parents of exceptional children were involved in organized parent activities and groups. While cognizant of the broad range of needs of parent involvement for all parents of exceptional children, the Task Force narrowed its focus to a particular population -- the minority and isolated parents of exceptional students. The Task Force defined the population as those parents of exceptional students who are from low socio-economic levels, differing ethnic groups, and who are considered to be geographically isolated. This group of parents may include, but is not limited to, those who are non-reading/illiterate, teen-aged, single, substance abusers, and those who experience language barriers or have disabilities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Executive Summary reviews the key points from the *Report* including an outline of current research on changing demography and subsequent challenges to educational systems; the issues of policy, resources and implementation; recommendations made by the Task Force; and a summary of Strategies and Practices for involving parents in the education of their exceptional children.

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PARENT/PROFESSIONAL TASK FORCE REPORT

INVOLVING MINORITY AND ISOLATED PARENTS IN THE EDUCATION OF THEIR EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS

INTRODUCTION

Trends in the Schools

The demographics of the public schools are rapidly changing. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), elementary school enrollment will increase by about 14% by 1992. This percentage represents an increase of approximately 3.8 million students. The statistics indicate that the racial, ethnic, and language compositions of the school populations are also changing. Dick Zeller, in a paper on "Real Numbers: Real Changes," points out that by the year 2000, nearly one-third of all Americans will be "non-white" (p. 8).

Zeller (1986) takes his terms "white" and "non-white" from the Census Bureau's practice of asking for self-identification designations. Focusing on the western United States, Zeller says that California, with a 1980 population of 28% non-white, will find by the turn of the century that "the collection of 'minorities' will have become the majority" (p. 17). He adds that these changes represent a "challenge for schools" and "the promise of a richer and fuller culture for the United States" (p. 8).

Zeller outlines several trends connected with immigration patterns to the United States that will affect the schools. According to him, most immigrants during the decade from 1971 to 1980 came from Mexico, Central America, South America and Asian countries. The immigrants

> arrive with more children, and have more children once here. . . . About 30% of arriving immigrants are under twenty years of age. These children become the immediate charges of (public) school systems. Because of the conditions from which they come, many have health and learning difficulties in school, apart from the difficulty of adapting to a new dominant language and cultural environment (p. 13).

Zeller concludes by urging educators to "reach out to those we haven't yet involved" (p. 22).

Hodgkinson's (1985) report on the demographics of education further substantiates the changing family structure of children enrolled in schools. The report stresses some very important issues for educators. Specifically, it indicates:

1. More children entering school from poverty households.
2. More children entering school from single-parent households.
3. More children from minority backgrounds.
4. A smaller percentage of children who have had Head Start and similar programs, even though more are eligible.

5. A larger number of children who were premature babies, leading to more learning difficulties in school.

6. More children from teen-age mothers (p. 10).

Hodgkinson further states that the rapid increase in minorities among the school population is here to stay. He gives several important reasons that educators need to make a major commitment to see that all students have the opportunity to perform academically at a high level despite challenges faced due to color, language, culture, and attitude. Among the factors cited by Hodgkinson are the following:

1. There will be a major demographic change in which large numbers of retirees will be taken out of the system and much smaller numbers of younger people put in by the year 2020 or even earlier.

2. Education can be a positive force for upward mobility. Hodgkinson points to a "solid and relatively well-established Black middle class family structure in the U.S." (p. 5).

3. By approximately the year 2000, one of every three Americans will be non-white. More of these non-white children will be ethnically and linguistically diverse, as well as poorer, and will suffer more handicaps affecting learning. Significantly, "minorities will cover a broader socioeconomic range than ever before, making simplistic treatment of their needs even less useful" (p. 7).

4. Within the next ten years, it is possible that ten states will have "minority majorities" (p. 7).

5. There is a direct link between state level economic development and high school retention. Florida ranks 48th of the states in retention. Further, there is more ethnic diversity in low retention states. One of the characteristics in the profiles of high school drop-outs is "parents who are not high school graduates and who are generally uninterested in the child's progress in school, and do not provide a support system for academic progress" (p. 11).

6. Home support is critical for early intervention programs to prevent dropping out, especially in situations of cultural differences and when English is not spoken by the child and in the home.

Because of these demographic factors, Hodgkinson argues that "the task will not be to lower the standards but to increase the effort. To do so will be to the direct benefit of all Americans. . ." (p. 18). The numbers of minorities in our schools will become so large that, if these students do not succeed, the nation as a whole will be adversely affected .

The demographic trends cited by Hodgkinson will particularly impact on Florida as the fourth largest state in the nation with continuing rapid growth. According to Florida *Fall 1987 Student Survey,* (Florida Department of Education, Management Information Services (1988)) statistics on educational enrollment, minority groups constitute approximately 35% of the current Florida school population.

The Final Report of the State Comprehensive Plan Committee to the State of Florida (February, 1987) identifies the importance of the need for active involvement of parents in the education of their children in order for the state to achieve its goals. This need is especially relevant to one of the keys -- an educated and motivated work force supported by adequate human services -- that was cited by the State Comprehensive Plan Committee as vital to attracting quality economic growth in the future. The Committee also cites the following statistics and projections for the state which lend support to the significance of the task of increasing minority and isolated parent involvement in the education of exceptional children:

- Since 1980, we have averaged 893 new residents every day (p. 1).
- Each day, as our state grows, we need services for . . . three children who are abused or emotionally disturbed, ten children who are developmentally disabled . . . (p. 6).
- One-fourth of Florida's nearly three million children -- and one half of Florida's non-white children -- live in poverty. And their numbers are growing rapidly. The percentage of Florida's children living in poverty increased from 17 percent in 1980 to 25 percent in 1986 (p. 20).
- One-third of all blacks in Florida live in poverty . . . . Thirteen percent of Florida's school children are not getting enough to eat at home . . . (p. 18).
- Nearly half of all black high-school students don't graduate (p. 16).
- During the next five years, Florida enrollments in kindergarten through the third grade will increase by 29.2 percent and overall enrollments in kindergarten through the twelfth grade will increase by 16.4 percent (pp. 16-17).
- Black unemployment in Florida is nearly 12 percent -- about twice the rate of the state as a whole . . . . Teenage unemployment is almost 18 percent. Unemployment among black teenagers is nearly 36 percent (p. 12).
- One tenth [of Florida's children] need special education (p.20).

The report concludes that "economic opportunities envisioned by the state plan can only be realized if these disadvantaged Floridians are brought into the mainstream of life in this state" (p. 18). **The report further states that "opportunities we miss to invest in children today become mortgages we will pay tomorrow -- through more public welfare, more expensive health care, more juvenile delinquency, more jails and prisons, and more expensive law enforcement" (p. 21).**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report, developed by the Parent/Professional Task Force over the course of the fiscal year 1987-88, outlines issues, recommendations, strategies, and resources related to increasing the involvement of minority and isolated parents in the education of their exceptional children. Input from reviewers selected by the Task Force to represent the diverse target groups has also been incorporated into the report. Much of the content of this report may be applicable to involving all parents of exceptional children. However, for the purpose of this paper, the Task Force narrowed its focus to the particular charge of making recommendations to the Bureau of Education for Exceptional Students regarding the development of resources for parent services in the following areas:

- methods for increasing the involvement of minority parents in the education of their exceptional children; and
- means of providing outreach to parents who are isolated.

The Task Force defined "parent involvement" as "a continuum of activities which promote parental [participation] and commitment in the educational process. These activities may range from initial awareness to active participation and commitment resulting in a full parent/professional partnership" (Florida Department of Education, *Parent Services to Support Florida's Exceptional Students*, 1986, p. 8).

The population of minority and isolated parents is defined as those parents of exceptional students who are from low socio-economic levels, differing ethnic groups, and who are considered to be geographically isolated. This group of parents may include but is not limited to those who are non-reading/illiterate, teen-aged, single, substance abusers, and those who experience language barriers or have disabilities.

The rationale for selection of this task was explained in terms of the rapidly changing demographics in the schools and the challenges with involving parents of exceptional students. Not only will the school population be increasing in the coming years, but statistics indicate that the racial, ethnic, and language compositions of the school populations are also changing. According to at least one estimate, by the year 2000 nearly one-third of all Americans will be "non-white" (Zeller, 1986, p. 8). It is quite possible that today's minority populations may become "minority majorities" in the future (Hodgkinson, 1985, p. 7). If effective means for accomodating the changing demographics and family structure cannot be found, the nation as a whole is likely to be adversely affected through the increased impact these groups will have on social, economic, educational, and cultural trends. Florida, as the fourth largest state in the nation and continuing rapid growth, will be similarly affected. *The Final Report of the State Comprehensive Plan Committee to the State of Florida* (February, 1987) identified the importance of the need for active involvement of parents in the education of their children to the state achieving its goals. The report cited statistics and projections which supported the significance of the task of increasing minority and isolated parent involvement in the education of exceptional children.

One of the main challenges with involving parents of exceptional students is that although educators know and understand the significance of involving parents in the educational process, they seem unsure about how to address the problem successfully. Research shows that few educators have been trained to understand the techniques and methods for effectively involving minority and isolated parents

in the educational process (McLoughlin, Edge, Petrosko, Strenecky and Key, 1984; Benson and Turnbull, 1985). In addition, many parents are either too threatened to be involved, or are unaware of the ways to participate in educational programs and activities. Because the future of education is so dependent upon the success of effective home/school relationships and programs, it is vital to find ways to reach out and involve minority and isolated parents of exceptional students.

The issues the Task Force identified revolve around questions of policy, resources, commitment, and implementation. These include the need for more adequate policy and coordinated services, more adequate funding, more effective use of training materials, greater sensitivity and understanding of culturally diverse families, and greater interagency understanding of existing policies and procedures affecting minority and isolated parent involvement.

Recommendations were formulated to provide guidelines for initiating effective changes. These included developing policies, procedures, and programs focused on overcoming barriers, using collaborative interagency efforts, identifying multiple funding sources, and providing comprehensive training for parents and professionals addressing cultural/economic diversity.

The "Strategies and Best Practices" section of the report contains the specific suggestions for implementation. Resources, training suggestions, and means of overcoming barriers are described. Some of the means to overcoming barriers with which the paper deals are interagency and interdisciplinary collaboration; recognizing, legitimizing, and insuring parent participation; outreach; and promoting the strengths in culturally diverse groups. Providing cross training for representatives of local service providers (e.g. schools, Health and Rehabilitative Services, and community agencies) and parents can promote familiarity with existing services and policies and encourage interagency and interdisciplinary collaboration. The idea of using indigenous and experienced parents to help plan and conduct meetings, and perhaps paying them a stipend, is suggested as a way to recognize and insure parent participation. Of particular importance in doing successful outreach is using creative and alternative methods of providing information to parents such as a "Welcome Wagon" approach (which includes representatives from the same culture, as well as education, and social services professionals). Informal or social events such as picnics, meals, and Christmas parties might be incorporated into meeting plans. It helps to make sure that basics like childcare, transportation, and convenient time and place are available to parents. The general theme of going to where the parents are and using people and ways that are familiar to them is echoed in many ways.

INVOLVING PARENTS OF EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS: THE CHALLENGE

Educators understand that parent involvement makes a significant difference in children's educational performance. Research shows, however, that few educators have been trained to understand the techniques and methods for effectively involving minority and isolated parents in the educational process. In addition, many parents are unaware of how to participate in educational programs and activities, and have never participated in a committee meeting, advisory group, school board meeting, or in advocacy training sessions. According to McLoughlin, Edge, Petrosko, Strenecky, & Key, (1984); Benson & Turnbull, (1985), very few parents understand their rights and the content of most reports.

The dilemma seems to be that, although educators know and understand the significance of involving parents in the educational process, they seem unsure about how to address the problem successfully. Gerry (1987) listed a number of reasons that parents do not participate as full partners:

- Parents may be reluctant to participate in their children's education because they are not sure whether they are qualified to play an active role.
- Effective communication skills may be lacking on the part of parents and educators.
- In making the decision about the placement of students, some school systems create a sense of informality which makes parents feel that there has not been careful deliberation about their children's needs.
- Past experiences may affect the ability of parents and educators to cooperate. Some parents have experienced great frustrations in attempting to obtain appropriate services. School personnel who have had difficult experiences with angry, demanding, apathetic, or uncooperative parents may prefer to avoid working with them.
- Some educators view parent participation only as a legal requirement and do not see parents as equal partners in the educational decision making process.

All these reasons should be examined as we develop parent involvement programs.

Sensitivity to working relationships is important according to McCray (1987). She believes that because non-verbal behavior is extremely important in conveying how people feel, educators should become more aware of their own actions. McCray also suggests that educators should not assume that they know more than the parents do. Educators need to learn to speak in everyday language and to refrain from making generalizations about parents of handicapped children.

In his book, *Communicating with Parents of Exceptional Children: Improving Parent-Teacher Relationships* (1985), Kroth states that parents are not a homogeneous group. Neither are minority and isolated parents of exceptional children a homogeneous group. They all bring individual strengths as well as individual weaknesses. But, according to McLoughlin, et al. (1984), they do have the

capacity to help educators with the education of their handicapped children. Parents are the first teachers of children. They possess the power to make a continued educational difference in their children.

Parents and professionals reviewing material for the Task Force also noted significant challenges to effective involvement, including the following concerns:

- Communication skills may not come naturally to either parents or professionals, an especially obvious challenge when working with non-English speaking families.

- Attendance at school meetings can be threatening for parents of exceptional children, as well as professionals. For parents the focus of the discussion may appear overwhelmingly negative, since it is likely to be on the child's deficits. Many parents have a history of negative encounters with school personnel, and having been intimidated by educators.

- Sometimes other family agendas, (such as providing food and shelter) may inhibit parental involvement.

Parents and professionals attempting to meet these challenges have other organizations with which to work. Organizations such as the Parent Education Network of Florida have made strides in education by parents for parents, and Parent to Parent of Florida has established over forty chapters around the state providing direct emotional support for parents. However, even with the tremendous inroads made by statewide parent organizations in the last few years, there is still a large group of parents not being reached, especially minority and isolated parents.

Parents and teachers are the most important persons in the educational lives of handicapped children. With positive guidance and education coming from both the home and the school, a more comprehensive educational program can be planned and implemented for the student. The future of education is very much dependent upon the success of effective home/school relationships and programs. The strength of the schools is dependent upon effectively meeting the challenges of involving minority and isolated parents (Brandt, R.S., 1986; Comer, J.P., 1987).

ISSUES, RECOMMENDATIONS, STRATEGIES, AND BEST PRACTICES

The issues related to the charge of involving minority and isolated parents are many and complex. The Task Force attempted to group the issues around several major categories in order to generate general recommendations which would then lead to more specific strategies and best practice suggestions. The listing which follows starts with identified issues and progresses to the ideas developed by the Task Force and reviewers representing the target groups for addressing the issues.

Issues

The following major issues revolve around questions of policy, resources, commitment, and implementation.

1. Adequate comprehensive policy and coordinated services for addressing involvement of minority and isolated parents of exceptional children are needed.

2. Adequate funding for implementing parent training/outreach programs throughout the child's school years is needed.

3. Effective use of training materials, as well as identification of new training materials, is needed.

4. Greater sensitivity and understanding of culturally diverse families are needed to encourage involvement of minority and isolated parents.

5. Greater interagency understanding of existing policies and procedures which affect the involvement of minority and isolated parents is needed.

Recommendations

The following recommendations developed by the Task Force are intended to provide general guidelines for initiating effective changes to involve minority and isolated parents.

1. Develop policies, procedures, and programs focused on overcoming barriers to minority parent involvement. These may include, but are not limited to, collaborative efforts of agencies to overcome cultural, social, language, transportation, and resource barriers.

2. Identify multiple sources of funding for implementation of parent involvement recommendations.

3. Provide a comprehensive training program for professionals and parents which addresses cultural/economic diversity and identifies approaches for dealing with the impact of this diversity on parent involvement. Basic to this training approach is learning to identify and address one's own values and perceptions so they do not interfere with others. Various models which address the different family structure patterns and needs could be employed (see resource section at the end of the text).

Strategies and Best Practices

The following strategies and best practice suggestions are intended to provide more specific ideas for involving minority and isolated parents. They are divided into the following sections:

(I) Overcoming Barriers to Minority and Isolated Parent Involvement,
(II) Resources, and
(III) Training.

I. Overcoming Barriers to Minority and Isolated Parent Involvement

A. Resources for interagency and interdisciplinary collaboration

1. Utilization of existing and potential resources

- Explore the utilization of existing and potential community, state, and federal resources, including monetary. A checklist and directory of these resources may be developed to include:

--community organizations;
--interagency councils;
--model programs;
--statewide parent training programs;
--mental health;
--Head Start;
--Education Consolidation Improvement Act, Chapter I Handicapped;
--Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services;
--child and maternal health programs;
--community service organizations - Lion's Club, Junior League, Kiwanis Club, and others;
--university programs;
--Department of Education;
--Parent Teacher Organizations;
--Parent to Parent;
--Parent Education Network;
--Direction Services;
--religious organizations;
--public school systems;
--community colleges;
--vocational schools; and
--private schools.

2. Training for interagency and interdisciplinary collaboration

- Develop training materials incorporating collaborative efforts between disciplines such as education, communications, psychology, social work, public health, and school nursing.

- Provide cross training for representatives of local service providers (such as schools, Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, and community agencies) and parent groups to familiarize them with existing policies and services provided.

- Invite service agencies to meetings for parents to become familiar with types of services available.

3. Cooperative agreements for interagency and interdisciplinary collaboration

   - Develop cooperative agreements for providing parent involvement between the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, local education agencies (LEAs), and other agencies.

B. Recognizing, legitimatizing, and insuring parent participation

1. Recognizing parent participation

   - Identify representatives of the following groups who could make presentations in training sessions:

     (1) minority parents,
     (2) community leaders who have been successful in involving minority parents, and
     (3) existing parent groups (e.g. Parent to Parent of Florida, Parent Education Network, Association for Retarded Children).

   - Use parent and other organizations and agencies to give positive recognition to school districts who go beyond meeting minimum requirements and regulations in involving parents.

2. Legitimatizing participation

   - Establish an Exceptional Student Education Parent Involvement Committee/Task Force at the school or district level to address needs unique to each area.

   - In addition to educators, service providers, and community leaders, include minority parents and other minority representatives on the local school advisory boards and interagency councils.

   - Involve parents in the development of curriculum to be used when working with minority and isolated parents of exceptional students.

3. Insuring parent participation

   - Assist school districts in establishing a parent involvement plan which includes policies and procedures for involving minority and isolated parents.

   - Include components on family and parent involvement in each school district's Master Inservice Plan.

   - Assess parent information needs.

- Involve parents in the planning of meetings. Solicit ideas from the parents about various programs they feel would be of interest to them. Include parents in the presentation of these topics.

- Enable parents to do for themselves and for their children rather than taking over for them. The goal should be to make them independent in dealing with the school system.

- Allow parents to prioritize their own involvement activities. Allow parents to choose the format for receiving information (such as written materials, one to one meeting, group meeting).

- Utilize parents as school volunteers.

- Ensure parent groups' participation:

  † Develop discussion/support groups led by parents. They can often be more successful than those led by professionals.

  † Train parents who have already been through parent training meetings to be parent trainers. Provide a small stipend for training provided.

- Parent participation in evaluation and placement:

  † Have parents meet with the professional before the professional has seen the child. This will convey the idea that parents have input, are needed and wanted, and have some control over their children's educational future.

  † Prior to the Individual Educational Plan meeting, have teachers request that parents develop objectives to be implemented.

  † Emphasize the positive aspects concerning children as much as possible.

  † When looking at ways to approach parents, recognize the importance of the birth order of the child (for example, first child).

C. Outreach

1. Identification of target population

   - Identify minority and isolated parent populations within the school district according to established criteria.

   - Identify service agencies within the school district and the services they provide.

2. Making contact

   - Identify members of the community to translate media and materials for parents. Utilize appropriate language/dialects and readability levels; illustrate media with pictures of members from the target

groups; use radio and TV stations listened to by the targeted audiences; use church bulletins, laundromats and community centers for advertisement of activities; work with community leaders in reaching parents.

- Talk with parents to identify methods of increasing parent involvement.

- Instead of traditional training methods, use alternative methods of providing information to parents:

  † "Welcome Wagon" approach: Teams should be representative of the same culture/community, the education profession, and social services.

  † Functioning "community support groups" that serve targeted groups (such as churches, ministerial alliances, urban leagues, etc.).

- Minimize written contact and maximize human/personal direct contact.

- Utilize telephone trees, classroom mothers/fathers, parent coordinator, or classroom teacher to call each parent the night before the scheduled parent meeting to remind them of the meeting as well as to stress the importance of involvement.

- Utilize local community newspapers to disseminate information.

- Gauge receptivity to making home visits to those families who are unable or who are too threatened to come to the school as well as to other minority and isolated parents who are accepting of visits.

- Prepare parent information that may be included as a part of general information/materials distributed at existing community meetings (churches, clubs, etc.).

- Send messages regarding meetings and general information to isolated rural communities via persons who frequent such areas on a regular basis (such as mail carriers, utility meter readers, bus drivers, local preachers, extension agents, and retired teachers).

- For isolated communities, use a mobile parent support vehicle that could move through the rural communities with materials for parents and a person to conduct meetings, support groups, etc.

- Be receptive to letting the parents talk about themselves. They may need to do this before they can focus on their children. Channel back and direct discussion as indicated to keep focused.

3. Special Activities

   - Complete a Parents' Needs Assessment with each family and structure meetings to meet identified needs of that group.

- Promote awareness among employers regarding the importance of parental participation in school conferences and of granting release time for this purpose.

- Prepare materials at the appropriate readability level and in the language of the community.

- Plan a respite weekend retreat for the entire family. Parents would attend workshops while siblings would have fun activities scheduled as well as sessions to help them deal with and understand their handicapped brother/sister. The handicapped child would be provided with activities and care.

- Encourage activities like the above or others for parents to take time for themselves in ways that do not add to guilt or frustration.

- Invite parents to class and to meetings of parents of children in a specific class. Have parent group per homeroom, etc. - smaller than usual PTO size.

4. Meetings

- Schedule meetings at times and in locations accessible to parents. Provide transportation if needed.

- Schedule meetings in an environment that is comfortable or familiar to the parents (such as private homes, churches, apartment buildings, club houses, etc.).

- Include childcare in overall program plans. Provide free babysitting for meetings. Consider using service clubs from the secondary schools to babysit.

- Send notifications of meetings one month in advance to allow working parents to plan to take time off. Send reminder notices in two weeks, in addition to calling the night before the meeting.

- Incorporate non-threatening social events such as picnics, meals, and Christmas parties into meeting plans. Social activities centered around cultural groups are less threatening than formal meetings.

- Hold meetings with parents that involve their children in activities such as plays, singing, and so forth to attract parent attendance.

- Attempt to provide meetings in the parents' language or to repeat sessions in other languages. Also, if it is not possible to conduct the meeting in the parents' language, provide for immediate translation so that all can focus on an idea at the same time.

- Train members of the target community population to conduct the parent training, activities, and services. Staff should include trained members of the target group/community.

- Evaluate every meeting to see if the presenter was received favorably and met participants' needs.

D. Cultural diversity

1. Need for Open Attitudes

- Adopt a non-judgmental, open-to-learning attitude in working with diverse minority groups.
- Wait to offer advice until you know how advice would be perceived and accepted.
- Balance the need to be firm and clear about the importance of family attending staffings with recognition of the choice parents have of whether or not to participate. Rather than automatically putting a negative label on parents (such as "uncaring") for not being involved, attempt to understand the reasons parents may choose not to participate, such as not having legal citizenship status, experiencing economic and cultural constraints, or feeling threatened by the outside culture.
- Take advantage of the natural strengths of minority extended families. Include the concerned aunt, grandmother, older sister, brother, or other relative when having a meeting. Sometimes parents need their natural "support group" with them.
- Use school social workers or other personnel with specialized expertise to make home and field visits.

2. Awareness Activities

- Organize a "Multicultural Day" within your school or school district.
- Translate school newsletters and publications into the languages spoken by the parents. Encourge language classes or clubs to invite bilingual students to be consultants for translating.

II. Resources

- Review, and reallocate according to prioritized needs, current funding sources for effectively involving parents in the educational process (for example, EHA, Part B).
- Utilize the Florida Diagnostic and Learning Resources System (FDLRS) Centers and other regional projects such as the Special Projects for Parent Services (Florida Department of Education, EHA, Part B), to develop appropriate media and printed materials to meet the needs of minority and isolated parents.
- Redirect school district resources to provide transportation, child care, and other services which make it possible for parents to become involved in the education of their children.

III. Training

A. Programs

- Utilize existing professionals and parent training materials to orient school district and agency staff and parents. Training programs should address the following topics:

  (1) family structure,
  (2) the place of the individual in the culture,
  (3) child-rearing practices,
  (4) social norms,
  (5) other social institutions in the community,
  (6) implications for parent training and support, and
  (7) family management and coping strategies.

- Identify the projects that have been funded which address models for culturally diverse groups. Consider applying them to conducting a statewide conference or a series of regional workshops on reaching out to families in a multicultural society.

- Provide training such as "strengths of black and other minority families."

- Begin training of parents and professionals during the pre-placement process. If policy can be developed to engage and advise parents at this early stage, they will be more in a position to be partners. If the school staff develops greater sensitivity and awareness to the barriers facing many parents, the automatic criticism and blame for lack of participation will be replaced by a willingness to work with parents.

- Field test inservice training programs.

- Train a core group of minority and isolated parents who would then be facilitators and trainers in the future. Pay a stipend or employ full-time.

B. Suggested requirements for professionals

- Require education in cultural diversities and family involvement for all professionals pursuing certification in special education.

- Require updating of parent conferencing skills for all exceptional student education professionals.

- Conduct communication skills training to enable staff to encourage parental cooperation through the use of common language and the avoidance of jargon.

- Assess teacher information needs (parents may be able to provide information).

- Emphasize training of teachers, who will ultimately be on the front line in working with minority parents.

CONCLUSION

Increasingly, parents are viewed as having not only the right, but the responsibility to be full partners in the educational process in order to assure that their children receive a quality education and support services. There is a gap between this view of parental involvement and the reality that most parents of exceptional students, especially minority and isolated parents, are not fully involved in the educational process for the many reasons discussed earlier in this report. These include cultural and economic factors such as speaking another language, having immediate survival needs which take precedence, being unaware of resources and methods, and feeling threatened in the midst of professionals. Parents of children with disabilities bring their unique insights about their child to the educational process. These insights are essential in the development and implementation of the individual educational plan. Parents must live with the outcome of the educational process; therefore, it is important that they participate as fully as possible in educational decisions. "Parents have to be recognized as the special educators, the true experts on their children; and professional people . . . . teachers, pediatricians, psychologists, and others have to learn to be consultants" (Hobbs, 1978, p. 497).

Service providers must look at the importance of the family context and the need for a variety of levels and types of family involvement activities and learn to view each family situation as unique. Preconceived ideas of families and their needs must be set aside and efforts exerted to stop offering only what is available or what is considered acceptable. "There is no fixed recipe or formula regarding what will work in all situations with all families. No two families are alike, and what has worked in the past with one family will not necessarily work in the future with another" (Benson & Turnbull, 1985, p. 149).

Educators need to think in terms of "cultural differences" or "cultural strengths" rather than "cultural barriers." They need to recognize that, in general, ethnic groups do not wish to be totally assimilated into the dominant culture (*Reaching Out*, 1986). Through mutual respect and knowledge of the cultures of various ethnic groups, educators can improve their systems and continue to strive to make a difference in the educational lives of exceptional students.

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RESOURCES

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